

POKÉMON
REBIRTH
ULTIMATUM
Endgame Edition



EPISODE TWENTY EIGHT
Shift Gear

Larson Sloane was an undercover pokémon agent, working for an organization known as the LFPE. He was a rookie, admittedly prone to assumption and leading more experienced agents on wild swanna chases, and as a result, his superiors had taken his reports with a grain of salt.

Blending in was a requirement of the job, and blending in was something snorlaxes were highly inefficient at. But Larson had only recently been given a low level illusion-based disguise generator, and was yet to receive a language translation unit, leaving him relatively helpless when trying to communicate with humans. Despite this lack of faith in him, Larson was pretty certain the guy he had been tracking recently was bad medicine. He had already watched him exchange words with one of the Eclipse agency's more formidable members, Sird Aquisa. This figure was out to prove himself in the field just as much as Larson was, but for a less worthy cause.

Up until a few hours ago, Larson had been following his target with pinpoint accuracy. Then the exhaustion had kicked in. It was something Larson had to deal with frequently, especially after meals, and it made his job even more challenging than it already was. But he was a persistent sort, and wasn't about to let his own biological foibles get the better of him.

Upon arriving in the nearest town, Larson made straight for its Pokéon Center in a bid to quickly restore some of his lost energy. Fortunately, the Nurse Joy in charge was busy with new arrivals, and was not present when Larson staggered through the Pokéon Center's sliding

front doors. To anyone hanging around in the lobby, this new arrival presented itself as a somewhat cumbersome, emerald green-haired man in his late 30s, wearing a pair of glasses, a coal black overcoat and hat. Nothing particularly out of the ordinary, albeit dressed in a curious fashion.

Upon reaching the desk, Larson motioned to the chansey behind it. Once he'd attracted her attention, the pokémon-in-human-guise reached into his jacket and pulled out his LFPE identification card.

<Oh, it's one of you,> the chansey responded, somewhat nonplussed.

<I'm on a mission right now,> Larson explained quietly in laboured tones. <I really need the use of your healer facilities.>

<You do realise the heal machine is no substitute for good rest...> the chansey began, eyeing Larson with a scolding expression. <Especially for a snorlax.>

<I know! But I'm tracking an important suspect! I'm so close!> Larson begged. <Just a few more hours...>

<Alright,> the chansey sighed. She raised a 'be right back' sign on the counter and waddled out into the corridor. <Come this way.>

Aside from the more frequently used Pokéball-based healing devices, every Pokémon Centre had at least one machine designed to

treat pokémon in a non-digitized state. In the back room where this machine was set up, Larson removed his illusion generator, overcoat and glasses, before carefully laying upon the reinforced platform. The chansey nurse then pressed some buttons on the control unit next to the machine, and a rounded lid closed over the platform - encasing Larson in a cylindrical unit. The entire unit began to hum, and Larson breathed a sigh of contentment as his emerald green fur was bathed in light. At least for a few minutes, he could forget about chasing social deviants or remembering not to talk.

Half an hour later, the machine ran its shutdown procedure and the lid opened again, allowing Larson to sit upright. The overwhelming grogginess had left him for now - he needed to make the most of this new burst of energy. Without a moment's pause, the clothing and illusion generator were put back on, grateful thanks bid to the chansey nurse, and Larson left the healer room in search of new leads. His stomach was already complaining about making this decision instead of going to breakfast, but Larson ignored it. Eating would only bring the overwhelming sleepiness on all over again.

He paused by the entrance to the Pokémon Center lounge, momentarily attracted by the sounds of news reports blaring from the room's television. A rain-soaked Hoennian anchorperson was standing in Dewford City giving details of the area's unseasonal storms. Larson inched forward, trying to hear what was being said. Then the picture on

the television rapidly switched, to be replaced by that of a Kantoan Pokémon Behaviour show.

"Working with ghost type pokémon requires not only mutual respect, but also great mental strength," the programme's voiceover relayed. "If you have neither, you will be in for a very hard time. Take this example."

"The gastly my son wanted to train is a nightmare!" the distraught looking woman on the screen exclaimed to the presenter. "It's made him obsessive and confused - yesterday he spent four hours walking into walls and hitting things with a rock! I just don't know what to do..."

Raucous laughter was heard from inside the room, causing Larson to flinch and step through the doorway for a closer look. The space was relatively empty save for one or two people minding their own business, enjoying hot drinks while sitting in armchairs. A trio of figures were sat upon the lounge sofa with their backs to the doorway, still engaged in their utterances of amusement.

"Getting possessed by his own pokémon," the magenta-haired one snortled. "What a dweeb."

"Guys, we really shouldn't be laughing about this..." the wavy-haired one insisted. There was a pause, then the trio descended into guffaws a second time. Larson shook his head at this and turned to go. His energy was much better spent elsewhere.

"Alright, we need to get serious," James insisted in lowered tones. "Now you're with us, you're going to have to get a disguise too, Jess."

"Why just me?" Jessie exclaimed. "What about him?" She pointed to Errol.

"I don't need no disguise," Errol grinned. "My whole body's a disguise!"

"Or at least it was until you showed up in the HQ and proved you weren't dead..." James bit his lip. Errol blinked in realisation.

"Oh...y' got a point dere," he looked sheepish.

"The boss isn't interested in us now," Jessie said dismissively. "He's too busy working on that freak of nature army."

"The boss may not be interested..." James began. "But who's to say his underlings aren't? Most of our records are in the criminal database, and it only takes one vindictive soul to add yours and Errol's..."

"Alright, alright," Jessie heaved a sigh.

"And you'll have to turn off your phasepack, too," James folded his arms. "Those things are like beacons to anyone with the know-how to track them."

"Well that won't be an issue," Jessie snorted. "I don't have a phasepack any more. I lost it with my Pokéballs and earrings back in that magnetic field."

"Your earrings?" James looked aghast, refocusing on the woman's left earlobe. He hadn't been paying attention before, but sure enough, the familiar green articles of jewellery were no longer present. "But Jessie, you've had those for years..."

"I know. I miss them too," Jessie looked upset. "But I'm not dwelling on what I've lost. Why should I - there's so much more I've gained from leaving..." she paused, aware of the other occupants in the room. "...that place."

"You bet'cha!" Errol beamed. "A clearer conscience fer a start. Remember dat good feelin' we had every time we helped out da twoips? We got dat now, poimenantly!"

"A fuller stomach, too!" James piped up.

"Not ta mention far less electrical-related flyin' lessons," Errol sweatdropped.

"And more importantly than that, my two goofy best friends," Jessie smiled, though the expression was a little sad. "Thanks for believing in me, even when I was so lost back there."

"Friends don't give up on those they truly care about," James told her.

"Gotta take da bad wit' da good," Errol agreed. The men both uttered yelps of surprise as Jessie moved behind them and threw her arms about their shoulders in an enthusiastic embrace. After the

Caley felt his heart rate climbing steadily as he dialled. The electronic music gave way to ringing which was quickly silenced as the person on the other end answered the call.

"Hello?" the woman's voice was soft and frail, as if its owner was functioning on little sleep.

"Mum, it's me," Caley began, giving a tentative glance to once side in case anyone happened to be watching. "I'm so sorry I had to rush off like that last time. I know it must have really worried you."

"Caley...please tell me what's going on," Pat begged.

"I...I can't," he said brokenly. "It was risky enough to talk to you at all right now."

"'Risky'?" Pat spluttered. "Caley, are you in danger?"

"No no, I'm alright..." the last word eked unconvincingly from Caley's lips.

"What happened to your sightseeing?" Pat asked, too focused on her son's deviation from his original plans to notice the shift in his voice.

"To be honest, mum..." Caley paused. He didn't feel prepared for the consequences of being honest, but these things needed to be said. "I haven't been sightseeing for a long time,"

"Why not?"

"Heh," Caley smiled faintly, gazing down at his feet. "Well you always did joke about me being too helpful."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

Caley tensed. This was the same tone his mother had used when he mentioned psychic abilities back in Scale Falls, and it was no easier to handle the second time around.

"Listen, I don't want to keep stuff from you," he said, with a little more conviction. "And I know you haven't been there after what happened to dad, but I need you to go to the Pokémon League Complex as soon as you can. They'll tell you what you need to know."

"Alright love," the tone of Pat's voice was distant and saddened, but resigned. "Just...be careful, okay?"

"Okay," Caley said. "I'll speak to you soon."

At least he hoped he would.

Bidding a grateful farewell to the Pokémon Center's Nurse Joy and her chansey accomplice, Caley and his friends left Cormouth Port and began heading north - towards Alia Summit. Having lent his jacket to Jessie to cover up the insignia on her Team Rocket uniform, James had led the way in restoring the camaraderie between himself and his two best friends. Now the trio hung around at the back of the group, swapping quips and loudly chuckling amongst themselves. While Adam muttered under his breath about what he considered an aggravating expression of mirth, and Denise tried to reason with him, Cory remained

silent and unresponsive - much to Mondo's upset. Knowing something was perplexing the zecutynt was one matter, but not knowing just what that something happened to be was driving a heavy wedge into Mondo's gut.

Caley and Rose walked at the head of the procession, though the attentions of the former were also elsewhere. He'd been gazing into his left palm on occasion, as if scrutinizing something. Psyduck had been observing this curious behaviour for some time, an excited glint in his usually blank eyes. As Rose turned her focus toward Caley, a spark of blue light flickered in the young man's hand for just a moment, before vanishing. Caley uttered a sound of vague annoyance.

"This conflict with Team Rocket is inevitable," he said, aware of Rose's eyes on him. "And I never intended to do this, but it seems I must become a trainer after all. Not just for Kota, but also for myself. Neither of us are prepared enough yet."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rose told him. "We can help you train, Caley."

"No," Caley said firmly. "I mean, I appreciate the offer...but I need to find someone willing to battle me without holding back. You guys mean well, but you'd be too concerned for me to give your all."

Rose paused, her expression noticeably awkward. She knew Caley was right, but neither did she like the implications of someone fighting

Caley with no holds barred. Yet the young man already had his mind set to the task. He glanced over his shoulder.

"Is there a Gym near here, Tate?"

"Oh, let me check," Mondo snapped out of his anxious state and hurriedly began perusing the guidebook. "There's one in the next place we'll come to. 'Vexel City Gym' - Run by a guy called Wikstrom Gampher. Specialises in Steel Type Pokémon."

"Then that's where we'll be heading," Caley stated. "I may have finally got my energy forming ability to work, but I've got to learn how to handle it properly before we come up against Team Rocket again."

"I agree," Rose nodded. "And I feel we *all* need to train for that day."

Psyduck listened to the conversation of the group increase in fervour and began to look thoughtful. True, he did want to become a stronger pokémon for Misty. But in the wider scope of things, being a stronger pokémon to help this group would also be a valid idea. Caley's determination and his brimming psychic abilities reminded Psyduck a lot of himself. Misty's other pokémon had told Psyduck that he had impressive telekinetic powers, though he could remember little of them. If he could somehow tap into that power and still retain his memory of the event...Psyduck screwed up his face in determination. There had to be a way.

Access to Vexel City was limited to a ride from a train station built on the locale's perimeter. As the train drew closer, the tips of Vexel's pristine glass-fronted buildings gradually became clearer to those approaching them. The majority of the spectators couldn't help but gasp in awe.

"Vexel City - Tatto's hub of technology," Mondo announced with a grin.

"I can't believe I finally got to visit," Denise marvelled with shiny eyes. "Taiko used to boast about going to Vexel City all the time..."

"Who's Taiko?" Mondo asked.

"Ah, one of my neighbors back in Palm Hills," Denise told him. "She's as much of a tech nut as I am, though more in the field of video games. Turns out there's a place that'll customize your games consoles around here."

"Amongst other things," Mondo grinned, glancing back at his guidebook in excitement. "Vexel City is most famous for its engineering, and many entrepreneurs visit here to commission Vexel's inventors to design them new and innovative devices. The level of creativity in this city is second to none!"

"So it's one better than nothing?" Adam raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. Before anyone had a chance to answer, an automated voice from the train's overhead speakers announced their arrival at Vexel Central Station. The group found themselves quickly funnelled out of the

carriage door with gusto, surrounded by eager commuters and businesspeople.

There was barely time to get acquainted with the surroundings, as Caley and his companions were hurried along in a river of moving bodies. Into a corridor they strode – the large animated billboards on the walls swooping past in a brightly coloured mass. Bleeps and trills clashed in midair, as the incoming calls of at least a hundred devices jostled for attention. A woman with a chatot played a synthesizer from inside an alcove, while the station's travellers streamed past.

The winding corridor eventually turned out its contents into a wide, though no less busy lobby, allowing Caley and the others to reorientate themselves. Saturated with excitement, Denise was quick to hijack the situation.

"Right!" she spoke up. "There's a lot to see here and there's no way we can all travel to all the places everyone wants to go in one group, so we're going to need to split up and meet back here later today. Sound fair?" There was a collective, slightly dazed nod. "Good good. Caley, you want to go to the Gym, correct?"

"Yes, I do," Caley replied.

"I will accompany him," Rose spoke up. "It would be a beneficial challenge to fight against someone with an element Sia is weaker to."

"I'm going to find a clothes store that sells decent outfits," Jessie sniffed.

"Though she could really use some cash for that," James added with a pleading expression. Denise chuckled and handed over some notes.

"I was reading the electronic bulletin board over there," Mondo piped up. "Turns out there's a Tech Fair on today! Must be why there's tons of people. I really want to go and see that!"

"A Tech Fair?" Denise's already glistening eyes managed to get even shinier. "Count me in! What about you, Adam? What do you want to do?"

"I..." the youth stalled, pallid and fidgeting. The journey from the train to the lobby had been a highly distressing experience, leaving him with a brain full of the mental equivalent of white noise.

"Do you want to go with Caley to the Gym?" Denise pressed enthusiastically.

"I...uh..." Adam tried to grasp at words. People dashed back and forth across his vision, making it impossible to focus on those closer to him.

"I mean, I doubt you'll be wanting to go anywhere with those three," Denise chuckled lightly, unaware of her listener's difficulty to communicate. "Personal preference, that's fine. Hey, would you rather come along with me and Mon-um, Tate?"

"I...I..." Adam stammered, unable to make eye contact. He wanted to shut his eyes tight in some weak hope that doing so would stop the chaos around him from existing, even just for a few moments.

"Well?" Denise frowned, growing impatient with Adam's seeming reluctance to answer her question. Adam gritted his teeth as his hands clenched tightly by his sides. Everything had become a blurred mass of sound and light - he couldn't think straight, fear gripped his stomach like a vice. And the persistent questions he couldn't answer only served to amplify the frustration within.

"I don't *want* to go with you!" Adam finally exploded. "I don't want to go ANYWHERE!"

An awkward silence descended amongst the group, while the surrounding murmurs of other pedestrians went on. Denise stared at Adam, her expression a mixture of hurt and aggravation.

"I'll let you guys sort this out," she remarked stuntedly. "We can meet back here at 5, okay?" Denise then turned without a further word, and walked off. Mondo was quick to follow, pulling Cory behind him while offering an apologetic glance in the group's direction.

"Well!" Jessie put on an uncomfortable smile. "I don't think there's anything I can bring to this situation, and I really must be getting that outfit, you know?"

downward toward its middle. At which point a virtual fountain generator sprung forth - thrusting tiny fragments of multi-coloured holographic light into the air and up over the heads of those poised upon the tiers within.

Denise stood there gazing up at these sparks and flickers without a hint of a smile passing her lips. Adam's outburst had hit her hard - now the ball of upset and bitterness jammed firmly inside Denise's throat was preventing the girl from enjoying the sights around her.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Mondo remarked. Denise flinched at his voice penetrating her brooding thoughts.

"He didn't have to yell at me," she muttered.

"I doubt he meant to, Neesee," Mondo insisted. "To be honest, he looked pretty stressed. And you *were* talking at him a lot, and not giving him a chance to reply."

"I was?" Denise looked surprised, then a little shameful. "Guess I got too excited, huh?"

"There's nothing wrong with being excited," Mondo smiled. "And why wouldn't you be? Look at all this cool stuff!"

"Yeah," Denise's expression lightened a bit. "But I shouldn't have stressed Adam out like that. It's tough being out here in the big wide world for *anyone*, never mind someone who's barely seen it before. I need to make it up to him somehow." She glanced around at the surrounding shops and her face was overcome with a grin at a dawning idea. "Stay here, I'll be right back!"

Mondo chuckled to himself as Denise ran off into one of the nearby shops, before turning his attention to Cory. Despite remaining mute, the expression upon the pokémon-in-human-form was now a lot more desperate, as if the secrets they harboured could no longer be kept under the surface. Recognizing this, Mondo decided to press for an answer one last time.

"Cory..." he began, sitting down on the edge of the fountain and coaxing his companion to do the same. "I know it's difficult to analyse painful stuff. But it's like a splinter - it'll just sit and fester inside you if you don't pick it out."

"You're...you're right," Cory replied softly. Their voice was hoarse, the result of not having spoken in some time. "When I tapped into the control device Team Rocket had put on Mirusyte, I somehow found myself watching one of Mirusyte's memories through her eyes. She witnessed a failed pokémon experiment being brutally wiped out by order of a Team Rocket scientist."

"Oh man..." Mondo grimaced. "No wonder you feel so messed up. Seeing that would've messed *me* up."

"No, it gets worse," Cory shuddered. "The creature that killed it...it was me."

"What?" Mondo froze.

"It was *me!*" Cory exclaimed, grabbing their companion by the shoulders, their eyes brimming with tears. "No wonder Mirusyte looked at me with such disgust...I'm a monster..."

"Whoa, whoa," Mondo tried to calm and quieten Cory simultaneously. Cory's previous loud revelation and resulting breakdown had grabbed the attention of some of the shopping mall's occupants. People that had been previously sitting at the fountain's edge had nervously made their exit. "How come you didn't know you'd done that before?"

"I'm not sure..." Cory gazed down at their feet in bewilderment. "When I gained consciousness, I didn't really know who or what I was. I only found out what Team Rocket had in store for me when I was looking through their database trying to find that info for Ritchie. I was going to be an assassin, Tate..."

"You *were*," Mondo pointed out. "The 'was' part is the important part here. You are what you *choose* to be, now."

"The report said the project was cancelled before it reached completion," Cory nodded. "They said I could not be controlled, that my body somehow had the ability to reprogram any methods they used to keep me in check. And that's what bothers me. Wh-what if I relapse and can't control *myself*? I-I..."

Jessie hadn't been on a good clothes-shopping spree in a long time. Back in Active Duty, there had been many opportunities to purchase new and classy outfits - mostly to be used as disguises to fool their target or those associated with him. Following her return to Team Rocket HQ and a consequential reassignment with Butch and Cassidy, it had been the same uniform day in and day out. Now, freed of Team Rocket's restrictions, this experience was proving to be invigorating and enjoyable.

After getting her hair styled and recoloured with a more bluish tint in one of Vexel City's hair salons, Jessie proceeded to spend the next hour in a prestigious clothing outlet. Her companions were not ones to let Jessie have all the fun, either - each of them trying on items while admiring and laughing at the others' choices accordingly. It wasn't until the manager became aware that these potential customers were modelling clothes more than purchasing them, that she threatened to cast them out unless they did. At which point, Jessie finally chose one set of clothes and the trio left to entertain themselves elsewhere.

After a good few minutes of walking, Jessie, James and Errol found themselves in the northern part of Vexel city. Here, the familiar rows of tall sparkling office buildings had vanished - in turn being replaced by large, somewhat dingy-looking warehouses. The air was punctuated with screeches, whines and hammering as figures clad in oil-stricken work outfits swarmed over large metallic constructions or sat in open doorways - pieces of machinery in their laps as they concentrated deeply on their efforts despite the horrendous noise.

"Look at dis place!" Errol exclaimed, spreading his arms wide as Jessie and James wandered behind him in a mixture of awe and cautiousness. "I don't know about youse two, but I feel somet'ing of a kindred spirithood wit' dese people."

"Yeah..." James murmured, a tone of distant nostalgia in his voice. "We *did* build a lot of things, didn't we? Admittedly they were mostly super-sized versions of radio controlled models from a toy catalogue, but..."

"Remember da Robo Bowling Pin?" Errol smirked, adjusting the brown cap he'd recently purchased while Jessie wandered off to take a closer look at what the inventors were doing.

"Nothing wrong with theming your mechas, is there?" James shrugged. "Now the one shaped like a giant Bug Catcher kid, *that* was nutty."

"Eeh...ain't gonna deny dat," Errol gave an awkward grin. "It's not easy ta come up wit' hundreds of ideas...or names for 'em."

"Wasn't there a mech you called the 'Clawbo-Robo-Extendoarm-Greenmeanie-Cageclaw'?" James said.

"Case in point," Errol sweatdropped.

"Huh..." Jessie mused. She was standing reading a poster someone had fixed to one of the nearby warehouses. "'Temporary assistants wanted'."

"Are you interested?" a voice spoke up from nearby, causing Jessie to flinch in alarm. Standing behind her was a five foot tall man with unkempt plum coloured hair, dressed in an open-collar boiler suit.

"Someone sure is enthusiastic," Jessie remarked under her breath.

"The name's Bernard, and I really need help," the man insisted. "The vehicle commission I have been working on is due today, but there is still so much left to be done on it. My pokémon team have been oh so helpful...but, there are some things only human hands can do. It would only be for a couple of hours."

"Well we *do* know our fair share o' da mechanical," Errol commented proudly, while James shot a studied look in the man's direction.

"What would be in it for us?" Jessie inquired sceptically.

"Oh I'd pay you for your time, of course," Bernard nodded, adjusting his glasses. "How's 120 Delcas each sound?" This statement was enough to make Jessie perk up, and Errol grow even more enthused.

"We'd be glad ta help!" he insisted. "Show us da way!"

Bernard promptly turned around and motioned for his new companions to follow as he strode off across the yard.

"Wow...this guy's gotta be loaded with cash if he's making such a generous offer," Jessie grinned, walking alongside James as they tagged along behind.

"Even so, I think we'd better keep our wits about us," James murmured, not at all happy about the confused state of his head.

"Something about him is making me feel odd, and I can't pinpoint why."

~**~~**~***~**~***~**~***

Shuttlecar Travel Sequence Activated. Destination: Vexel City Gym

As the sleek, metallic, four-person transport glided smoothly out of the docking area upon its singular rail and entered the open air, Caley resigned himself to gazing out of the bubble window nearest him with silent wonderment. Adam, on the other hand, took to glowering down at the rubber-clad floor with his arms tightly folded. It was more than obvious what matters were bothering his mind.

"Still can't see why she gets all gooey over nerds screwing bits of junk together," he muttered, causing Rose to look back from the city map she had been studying.

"Maybe because Denise finds technology fascinating," she replied calmly. Adam jerked his head upward, having been unaware of his audience until this particular moment.

"People don't all like the same things, Ad'," Caley joined in, gently stroking the top of Kota's head.

"Exactly," Rose smiled. "Our duty as friends is to allow for the differences of others, and that includes interests as well as personalities."

"I know that," Adam grunted. "My stupid temper got the better of me again. I'm such an idiot. Why does stuff come out of my mouth before I have a chance to think about it?" He caught sight of Psyduck giving him a long hard stare. "What're you looking at?" he snapped, shortly followed by a flinch of realisation and a heavy sigh. "Ugh... 'm sorry."

"Psy-ay," Psyduck gave the hunched youth a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

A few minutes later, the shuttle glided to a standstill inside an allocated bay.

Thank you for travelling with Vexel Shuttlecars, it told the group in cheerfully mundane tones as the doors in the side slid open. *We hope you have a pleasant day.*

Adam snorted at no one in particular, flicking a pebble at the departing vehicle with his foot while Rose, Sia, Caley, Kota and Psyduck

glanced upward in awe at the sight behind him. An impressive luminescent dome rose up between the more everyday-looking office buildings of the city. It was built atop a concrete platform with solar panels embedded into it, and its entire surface sparkled and shimmered with a life of its own. It gave the appearance of being translucent, yet the visitors could not make out anything within.

"What an unusual building," Rose commented, impressed. "I wonder what it's made of."

"We could ask the gym leader about that when we get inside," Caley grinned, quickening his pace and passing through a fence made entirely of laser lights that surrounded the dome. Adam slipped up beside him.

"*Inside?*" he raised an eyebrow. "I can't see any way of getting into that freaky bubble, can you?"

Caley slowed to a halt and glanced upward, his face falling. Adam was right - there didn't seem to be a means to enter the building, since its curvaceous walls were absent of any doorways. Even odder was the presence of an intercom system on a stand, much like the ones usually seen in the drivethru areas of fast food outlets.

"Maybe the doors are just well hidden," the young man remarked, a partially worried tone in his voice. Rose leant to the side and gave the button on the intercom a tentative press.

"This is Vexel City Gym, how may I help you?" a bored, well-spoken voice ensued from the speaker with a metallic tint. It was obvious from the thoroughly rehearsed tones as to how many times the figure had uttered these words before.

"We're here to challenge the Gym Leader," Caley responded brightly, in total contrast to the one whom had previously addressed them.

"Aren't you always?" the voice sighed heavily. "Fair enough. Keep still...I'll transport you in."

Adam blinked as the intercom cut off and Rose looked down at the area of floor upon which they were all standing. It was formed into a slightly lighter coloured square under their feet.

"A Warp Tile. Just as I suspected," she remarked calmly.

"What the hell's a Warp Tile?" Adam exclaimed with noticeable panic, while Caley looked around excitedly yet again.

"Ancient Teleportation Technology," Rose explained. "Originally used for authorised entry into highly secure areas. Modern versions are pretty hard to find and mostly used for show these days."

"Teleportation?" the adolescent almost squeaked. "It's bad enough when a pokémon does it - I don't wanna be zapped to bits by a machine!" He made a move to walk away but Rose placed a hand on his shoulder to hold him back.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," she remarked sternly. "Leaving the tile while it's preparing for transport could easily cause parts of you to vanish elsewhere. Besides, it won't hurt."

"And what makes *you* so sure?" Adam snapped. Suddenly he felt his body grow oddly warm as a slight tingle ran across his shoulders and down his arms. Rose glanced back at him, her figure now emanating a gentle whitish glow.

"I've done this before," she said, her voice distorting slightly like a radio transmission losing its strength. Adam gasped as the feeling in his limbs deserted him entirely. The brilliant light surrounding him turned to pitch black as he appeared to float for just a second within a void before gravity took hold of him once more - pulling every particle back together in rapid unison and throwing him downward in what seemed to be an inevitable impact.

"Wow..."

Adam staggered slightly as tangible scenery returned to meet his vision and Caley's distantly dazed statement invaded his ears. It felt like he had fallen several hundred feet and yet he was still standing upon his own.

"See, it wasn't so bad, was it?" smiled Rose, who by experience was perfectly nonplussed about the whole thing. Her shorter and much paler-looking associate, however, was not taking the situation so well.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," he slurred, and consequently was, in the nearest trash can.

"Oh marvellous," came tones dripping with sarcasm from behind the group. "That's the fifth visitor to have done that this week. We really need to get some proper doors like *other* gyms."

Everyone looked round in surprise, having recognized the voice as being the same one who had addressed them on the intercom outside just a few moments ago. They were greeted with the sight of a blue semi-transparent figure floating bemusedly before them. Its body was vaguely humanoid, though absent of legs – instead diminishing from the waist into a lighter coloured tail being generated from a small projector unit. The face bore some resemblance to that of a walrein, and the back of the head was dressed with a cloud-like stream of hair which waved of its own accord.

Noting the mutual expressions of utter befuddlement from its human audience, the holographic figure muttered to themselves – the circle of black orbs surrounding their body spinning faster as a result of their agitation.

"Welcome, trainers," they droned a pre-programmed recital. "To Lavender's Virtual Pokémon Gym. My name is Tolos and I shall be your-" The hologram distorted and fizzled slightly as Adam proceeded to curiously pass his finger through its form. "Please refrain from poking the guide," Tolos muttered, while Rose frowned in Adam's direction and Caley

chuckled nervously. "Unless you sincerely wish to get lost - these projection units don't come cheap, you know."

"Wait, *Virtual* Pokémon?" Caley blinked. "I thought this was a Steel Type Gym."

"In which case, you shall be greatly disappointed, young sir," Tolos said, their yellow eyes meeting with Caley's own. "If you still wish to make a challenge, however, follow me, Lavender should be in the battle room if the repair work is still going on."

"Repair work?" Caley echoed as he took up walking beside the hologram.

"Earlier combatants seemed incapable of containing their... excitement," Tolos spoke condescendingly. "They ended up damaging one of the generators responsible for creating the battle grid - Lavender has been working to get it back online."

Adam cast his gaze about the surrounding walls as he pursued his companions and their irritable escort down the corridor. They bore the same inexplicable iridescence as the outside of the dome, only now the boy was closer to them, their appearance seemed all the more unsettling.

"So this entire gym is a 'projection'?" Rose inquired. Tolos's face grew somewhat brighter at what they considered to be a much more intelligent question.

"All but the outermost walls, yes," they responded. "Vexel City Gym is one of a select few virtual constructions in the world."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Caley blinked, as Psyduck put a webbed hand against the wall nearest to him.

"No more dangerous than a building made of non-cyber materials," Tolos said. "Since our energy supply is a hybrid of solar and pokémon-derived, we do not have to worry about power outages causing the generators to stop functioning. In fact, there are many advantages to a place such as this. For a start, it is a self-repairing construct."

Caley was about to open his mouth to ask how on earth was such a thing possible when Psyduck let out a loud squawk, reversing straight into him.

"The wall..." Adam gibbered. "It's...*waving* at us!"

"Seems your prying young friend has already discovered the means of repair," Tolos smirked, as Rose glanced above her head somewhat worriedly. She had also noticed a flicker of a passing face, complete with two beady eyes and a cheeky grin. Another followed in the opposite direction, while several zoomed across the floor under the group's feet, causing Adam to flinch.

"What *are* they?" she asked, while Caley took to pressing the button on the side of his glasses in an attempt to identify the creatures.

"Witukae," Tolos explained. "They are the Virtual Type sprite pokémon that reside within the gym structure and take care of the majority of its maintenance. And don't worry about their wellbeing - witukae are at their happiest when inside Cyberspace or similar

cybernetic materials. The work keeps them out of mischief, too. Ah, here we are."

The group had reached the end of the corridor, and there, a large open space awaited them. It was presented like any other official gym hall apart from the fact the area reserved for battling was divided into a large grid, instead of the more sports field design other fields adopted. Upon the far side of the hall crouched a young woman wearing a mauve-coloured bodysuit emblazoned with contrasting circuit-like patterns. She was carefully studying the innards of one of the building's 'pillars' and was flanked on either side by two electabuzz which were occasionally passing her tools upon request.

"Some challengers to see you, ma'am," Tolos announced. Despite being a good distance away, Lavender stopped her tinkering, shut the pillar's hatch and looked back toward the entrance to the hall. The visitors caught a glimpse of the headset she was wearing on her right ear.

"Wonderful!" the woman smiled, turning round and walking toward Caley and his friends. The former looked as if he couldn't contain himself much longer. "I'd just finished patching up the old D19, so you're just in time. Of course it'll have to be run through recalibration first, but I doubt that'll take that long. So, you're here to earn a Gym Badge, hm?"

"Not exactly," Caley looked a little sheepish. "I *did* want to battle you, but it's not for a badge. Kota and I could really use training from someone with experience."

"Really now~?" Lavender eyed Caley curiously. She was surprised, but in a manner that dictated a growing interest. "Preparing for a big event?"

"You could say that," Caley scratched the back of his head. "Though I'll admit I was expecting to find a Steel Type Gym in Vexel City."

"Well there was, up until four years ago," Lavender explained, smoothing her very short hair under the band she was wearing. "Wikstrom decided he wanted to hone his skills in a new place, and moved out to Sinnoh, leaving the Gym to me. Kind enough guy, a little archaic." She paused and chuckled lightly, noticing the bewildered expressions on her listeners. "But in short, I'm running things around here now! Does that change your request in any way?"

"Oh no, not at all," Caley insisted. "I've never battled on a virtual field before. It sure would prepare me for unexpected situations."

"You bet it would!" Lavender grinned. "As soon as generator D19 is up and running, we can begin. In the meantime, would any of you care for a drink?"

Rose nodded furiously. That sounded like the best idea she'd heard in a long while.

~**~~**~***~**~***~**~***

"Ohhhhhh...I'm in heaven. Please don't wake me up from this beautiful dream..."

The three figures had arrived at the entrance to Vexel City's Tech Fair and were now frozen to the spot as they marvelled at the contents within. Despite it still being fairly early in the day, the area was already thriving with the bodies of many people and their pokémon companions - some dressed in smart attire, others in warm but casual outfits, milling around a wide array of well-stocked tables manned by figures in boiler suits and overalls. As they picked their way amongst the tables, Denise examined the contents upon each of them carefully. Each meticulously-built device had been polished so well, that her reflection could be clearly seen upon their metallic surfaces.

"Now that little gizmo is a Thybration Unit," an unkempt-looking figure behind the table conveyed at speed, as Denise studied a delicate object laid out upon a velveteen cloth. "It can tap into your inner energies and pep them up! Think of it as your body's version of a good strong cup of coffee!"

"That...sure is different," Denise glanced up, a little nervously.

"Though this one is a prototype, not perfect," the man continued with a grin, his right eye twitching slightly. "I've tried it on myself a few times."

The trio grimaced amongst themselves and decided it best to move on to another table. This self-testing was more than apparent.

"This is how *everyone's* going to be communicating in the next ten years!" another, more smartly dressed man insisted - holding up a wristwatch device with a pliable flat screen. "The Crosstransceiver will take video calling on the move, so you won't have to stop off at a public callbox to see a loved one's face while abroad."

"Awesome!" Mondo grinned. The trio wandered to yet another table. This table stood out more notably than the others - hedged by colourful vertical banners displaying the words 'Pokémon Box', assumedly the title of the product on show.

"Simple name, simple design," a woman with a purple, cube-shaped device strapped to her back announced. "But it can carry twice as many pokémon as a trainer can with Pokéballs. It has an easy to use catalogue and retrieval system too!"

"Good luck on getting *that* licensed," Denise remarked under her breath, once she was out of earshot. "We all know how strict the league is about their six pokémon travel limit."

Cory stopped and gazed across at a table opposite the row they had been walking alongside. A shiny reflective disc had caught their eye, coaxing the pokémon-in-human-guise to move closer.

"I see you're interested in my research," a warm female voice spoke. Cory looked up in surprise to see a figure in her late thirties,

wearing an all-in-one black bodysuit covered by a lab coat. Her white hair was strung in two zigzag formations past her ears, while the remainder of it was held back by a pair of thick grey goggles.

"Uh...y-yes," Cory nodded shyly, glancing back at the disc. "What does your project do?"

"Here you are!" Denise appeared behind Cory. "I thought we'd lost you for a moment ther-" she paused, catching the name tag of the woman behind the table. "Professor Burnet...you're the lady studying unusual phenomena!"

"And *you're* one of the kids who dropped in on my lab the other week!" Teri exclaimed happily. "I'm glad to see you were able to reverse that little variable-related mishap."

Mondo and Cory shot Denise puzzled looks, while Denise blushed a little, but said nothing. She didn't really wish to recount the oddities of that day in Edgeville - at least not right now.

"You've picked an excellent place to visit for inspiration," Teri gave a nod. "It doesn't matter what field you're interested in, there's something for everyone - including my Variable Disclosure Speculum." She motioned to the reflective pane. "For many years, the scientific world has struggled to understand the mechanics of Pokémon Formes - those temporary evolution-like shifts that some species of pokémon possess. Why are they temporary? Why are they only triggered by exposure to

certain types of energy? Do all pokémon have this latent power? The questions go on and on."

"So how will this device help in your research?" Denise asked, intrigued.

"It will allow me to peer into a pokémon's variables - to see what hidden potential they may or may not have."

"Hidden...potential..." Cory murmured to himself. They had sensed a curious aura from the Variable Disclosure Speculum, and this talk of latent forms made Cory wonder if such a device could help them gain better insight into their own biology. For safety's sake, more than anything. "Ms. Burnet? Could I make a strange request?"

"You want to see the VDS in action?" Teri smiled eagerly.

"Actually, yes," Cory replied. "But..." they leaned forward and lowered the volume of their voice. "Could you try using it on me?"

"Cory!" Denise and Mondo exclaimed in unison.

"You can't do that!" the latter spluttered. "It's an experimental device, what if something goes wrong?"

"Something could have gone wrong in that dream projector machine you volunteered to go in, and I never tried to stop *you*," Cory remarked, giving Mondo a stern look. "This is important!"

"Are you a pokémon?" Teri blinked. This inquiry was not delivered derisively, but with genuine interest. Cory gave a small nod.

"What is it?" Errol asked, while Jessie wrinkled up her nose at the workshop's haphazard chaos.

"A piece of construction equipment, I've been told," Bernard replied. "Oh! Before we get back to work, let me introduce you to the rest of the team." He called into the depths of the workshop, and was soon joined by the tyroque from earlier, an electrode and a charmeleon. "This little fella here is Junior," Bernard smiled, placing a hand on the tyroque's shoulder. "He helps me to test out my machines, amongst other things. Next to him is DC - he's a real power pack, so watch yourself around him. And the gal on the end is Firecracker - an excellent welder for sure."

"Nice ta meet'cha!" Errol waved cheerily. "Da name's Damon."

"I'm Lilly," Jessie added, with a slight flourish.

"And I'm Carl," James tagged on.

"Brilliant!" Bernard said in pleased tones, wandering over to a work desk cluttered with various articles and picking up a roll of paper. "Now everyone's acquainted, we can get going. Hmm...now where are my glasses..."

"Rohg, ty ty roh," Junior commented, looking somewhat embarrassed and motioning toward Bernard's forehead. The man looked upward as his hands brushed across something cold and hard.

"Oh!" he laughed nervously, retrieving the glasses from their perch and arranging them in a more useful spot before his eyes. "Thank you, Junior."

Soon the team were hard at work finishing the machine, using parts from a variety of previous unfinished or impractical past designs Bernard had attempted. At this precise moment in time, the man was fully absorbed in making sure all the joints were firmly affixed.

"Roll over here, DC!" he waved. "I need your power for this drill!"

"Trode!" the large spherical pokémon intoned agreeably, approaching at speed. Bernard waved his arms around frantically as the electrode narrowly missed a toolbox that had been lying in its path.

"Heyhey, slow down! You're going to blow up again if you race around like that," he scolded. Errol flinched upon the thought of blasting off again regardless of their reformed status, but quickly got a hold of himself and realigned the panel he had been holding in place for Firecracker to weld to the side of the machine. Thankfully no unwanted explosions occurred - Bernard knelt down and placed two wires to each side of DC then handed the drill to James.

"There you go, Carl. Make sure that arm is on nice and tight."

"Can do!" James grinned.

"Good work everyone!" Bernard said appreciatively, wandering toward an area of the workshop which appeared to have been reserved specifically for kitchen duties. "I'm going to make some tea. None of my pokémon are into the stuff, but would you three like a cup?"

"Sure," James smiled, happy to oblige. With Bernard's absent-minded nature, no doubt he would receive tea whether he wanted it or not.

"No thanks," Jessie shook her head. Errol did the same.

"Got any milk?"

"Of course!" Bernard chuckled, opening a cupboard. "How else would one make tea? Well well... looks like we're running low on sugar..."

Noting the attentions of the man had been diverted, James approached Bernard's work desk - idly scanning the jumbled mass of letters and plans across its surface. Somewhere behind the thick layer of paper, he caught sight of a colour image - its once bright hues faded by the passage of time. There was Bernard, at least ten years younger, yet still with the same excitable, almost mischievous grin. Standing to his right was a well-dressed, slightly older man with ultramarine hair and a businesslike expression. Next to him was a prim-looking woman with shoulder length magenta hair, clasping a white parasol. And between these two adults, there stood...James himself.

His eyes widened dramatically. There was no mistaking it, the nine year old boy in that picture was undoubtedly him - dressed in that familiar blue jacket and shorts ensemble he'd been rather fond of. It suddenly dawned on James as to why he'd felt so curious upon first meeting the inventor. The memory had been somewhat faded, but seeing

this photograph brought it back into startling focus. Bernard was, in fact, a Morgan. His father's brother. *His* uncle.

Part of James was filled with great excitement at this realisation. Uncle Bernie was a man whom he'd admired since childhood. He was enthusiastic, creative, unafraid of failure despite experiencing much of it - and as such, considered a bad influence by James' stuffy, perfectionist father. It had been a long time since James had visited, and now this opportunity had landed right in his lap. But with one major complication - his true identity was supposed to be kept to himself.

The other part of James cursed inwardly at this. Now he knew the desperate longing Denise must have felt when encountering her parents back in Mayni City. Who knew when another chance to spend time with his uncle would come along? But was it really worth revealing his identity for?

"This guy's quite the eccentric," Jessie remarked under her breath, watching the figure searching for various utensils.

"True," James responded as he approached. "But he's nothing like dad, thankfully."

"Huh?" Jessie blinked.

"I wasn't certain at first, but seeing a photograph over there made sense of those weird nagging feelings in my head," James explained.

"That man is my Uncle."

"Heh! What are da chances o' dat?" Errol smirked. "You gonna tell him who you are?"

James gazed wistfully across the room, but said nothing. Bernard returned to the group bearing a tray with four mugs of tea balanced somewhat precariously upon it. Groaning slightly, two members of the trio reluctantly took their beverages while James tried not to chuckle over the expressions on their faces and picked up his own receptacle. He wasn't sure how Bernard would react to his appearance, were he to reveal his true identity. With that in mind, James decided he would anonymously bask in his Uncle's delightful eccentricity just that bit longer.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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